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LOCAL

Former Sheboygan human resources director alleges she was retaliated against for opposing sexual harassment in the workplace

**Maya Hiltz**

Sheboygan Press

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SHEBOYGAN - In February, Sheboygan's then human resources director filed a complaint with the state alleging the city administrator organized "hostility" against her in retaliation for her opposing sexual harassment of another city employee.

As of earlier this month, the case was still under investigation by Wisconsin's Equal Rights Division, according to the Department of Workforce Development.

"Since this is an ongoing investigation, I am not allowed to discuss anything further regarding this topic," Mayor Ryan Sorenson said in a statement. "I take this situation very seriously."

City Administrator Todd Wolf did not respond to a request for comment.

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Former director alleges city administrator 'steadily ostracized' her

In February 2021, a police officer with the Sheboygan Police Department told the city's director of Human Resources and Labor Relations, Vicky Schneider, that she was being

sexually harassed and discriminated against by male officers and supervisors in the department, according to the female police officer's complaint filed with the state Department of Workforce Development.

"The extent of the allegations and the personnel involved in them was not fully known" by Schneider until late July 2021, she wrote in her own complaint filed with the state.

"Between this time in late July 2021 and through September 2021, I expressed serious concerns regarding and openly questioned the sufficiency of the respondent's remedial efforts to address the sexual harassment and other inappropriate sexual behavior involving City employees," Schneider wrote.

In her complaint, Schneider said Wolf told her not to let the situation "taint" her.

"Thereafter, I have seen my role marginalized and have been steadily ostracized by the city administrator," she wrote. "He has instructed members of my own staff to spy on me and report anything that could advance his obvious plan to set me up for failure," she alleged.

Schneider alleges Wolf excluded her from meetings and that he "worked to undermine my authority by implying that I was not qualified, I was struggling, or any number of insinuations," she wrote in her resignation letter addressed to the city council, Wolf and Sorenson in May.

In early November 2021, Schneider hired an attorney to protect herself against what she alleged was workplace retaliation, which "escalated significantly over the months of September, October, and into November, such that it negatively affected my physical and mental health," she wrote in her resignation letter.

She alleges city leadership was "well aware" of her experience, including that Sorenson said she had a "target" on her back from the city administrator.

As a result of the alleged retaliation, Schneider took medical leave at the end of November until it was exhausted toward the end of March 2022.

"As no significant change was offered or implemented to allow me to return to work safely over the past six months, I find that I must resign my position," she wrote.

"I want each of you to know that I truly enjoyed my work for the City of Sheboygan, and am sad that it is ending in this manner. It was a privilege to serve the community in which I raised my children and continue to enjoy its many services, parks, and natural beauty."

According to Schneider's attorney, Peter Fox, an initial determination of whether retaliation occurred had not yet been made in her case as of earlier this month.

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Here's Sheboygan's policy on responding to allegations of sexual harassment

According to Sheboygan's employee handbook, any complaints of harassment should be referred from a supervisor to the department head and human resources director.

"We investigate all allegations brought to our attention," Sorenson said.

Under the direction of the human resources director, an investigation will ensure that all facts are reviewed and documented and appropriate disciplinary action is taken, if warranted.

Any employee found to have violated the harassment policy will be subject to disciplinary action, up to and including firing, and corrective action must be taken if the investigation determines other city employees are affected by or participated in the harassment.

The city "forbids retaliation" against anyone who reports or assists in the investigation of an alleged harassment complaint, and anyone who retaliates is subject to appropriate disciplinary action up to and including firing, according to the policy.

Reach Maya Hilty at 920-400-7485 or MHilty@sheboygan.gannett.com. Follow her on Twitter at @maya_hilty.

